

Why is Sweden closing its prisons?

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

The title of the article is *Why is Sweden closing its prisons?* What could be the answer to this question? Write your suggestion on a piece of paper and then discuss all your answers in class.

2 Key words

Scan the article to find the key words that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. supporting social and political change that aims to make a system fairer _____ (para 1)
2. a system by which someone who has committed a crime has to agree not to break the law again and to let an officer check their behaviour for a specific period of time _____ (para 2)
3. the act of helping someone who has been in prison to return to an independent, law-abiding life _____ (para 3)
4. a return to your previous bad behaviour _____ (para 3)
5. a period of time that a person must spend in prison _____ (para 5)
6. changed to a less severe punishment _____ (para 5)
7. proved to be guilty of a crime by a court of law _____ (para 5)
8. committing another crime _____ (para 5)
9. the state of being on prison _____ (para 6)
10. not educated or trained to a high or professional standard in a particular subject _____ (para 7)
11. make someone become a full member of society again and be involved completely in its activities _____ (para 10)
12. in prison _____ (para 10)

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Sweden's prison population has dropped so dramatically that the country plans to close four of its prisons. What lessons can other countries learn?

Erwin James

1 December, 2013

- 1 Swedish prisons have long had a reputation around the world for being progressive. But are the country's prisons a soft option?
- 2 The head of Sweden's prison and probation service, Nils Oberg, announced in November 2013 that four Swedish prisons are to be closed due to an "out of the ordinary" decline in prisoner numbers.
- 3 Although there has been no fall in crime rates, between 2011 and 2012 there was a 6% drop in Sweden's prisoner population, now a little over 4,500. A similar decrease is expected in 2013 and 2014. Oberg admitted to being puzzled by the unexpected dip, but expressed optimism that the reason was to do with how his prisons are run. "We certainly hope that the efforts we invest in rehabilitation and preventing relapse of crime has had an impact," he said.
- 4 "The modern prison service in Sweden is very different from when I joined as a young prison officer in 1978," says Kenneth Gustafsson, governor of Kumla Prison, Sweden's most secure jail, situated 130 miles west of Stockholm. However, he doesn't think the system has gone soft. "When I joined, the focus was very much on humanity in prisons. Prisoners were treated well – maybe too well, some might say. But, after a number of high-profile escapes in 2004, we had to rebalance and place more emphasis on security."
- 5 Despite the hardening of attitudes toward prison security following the escape scandals, the Swedes still managed to maintain a broadly humane approach to sentencing, even of the most serious offenders: jail terms rarely exceed ten years; those who receive life imprisonment can still apply to the courts after a decade to have the sentence commuted to a fixed term, usually in the region of 18 to 25 years. Sweden was the first country in Europe to introduce the electronic tagging of convicted criminals and continues to strive to minimize short-term prison sentences wherever possible by using community-based measures, which have been proven to be more effective at reducing reoffending.
- 6 The overall reoffending rate in Sweden stands at between 30 and 40% over three years – to compare that with another European country, the number is around half that of the UK. One likely reason for the relatively low reoffending rate and the low rate of incarceration in Sweden (below 70 per 100,000 head of population) is that the age of criminal responsibility is set at 15. In the UK, for example, children aged ten to 17 and young people under the age of 21 record the highest reoffending rates: almost three quarters and two thirds, respectively. A good proportion of these offenders go on to populate adult jails. In Sweden, no young person under the age of 21 can be sentenced to life – this is not the case in many other countries – and every effort is made to ensure that as few juvenile offenders as possible end up in prison.
- 7 One strong reason for the drop in prison numbers might be the amount of post-prison support available in Sweden. A confident probation service – a government agency – is tasked not only with supervising those on probation but is also guaranteed to provide treatment programmes for offenders with drug, alcohol or violence issues. The service is assisted by around 4,500 lay supervisors – members of the public who volunteer to befriend and support offenders under supervision.
- 8 Gustafsson talks about broader goals and objectives for the Swedish justice department: "In 2013 and 2014, the priority of our work will be with young offenders and men with convictions of violent behaviour. For many years, we have been running programmes to help those addicted to drugs. Now, we are also developing programmes to address behaviours such as aggression and violence. These are the important things for our society when these people are released."
- 9 I spoke to a former prisoner who now runs a social enterprise called X-Cons Sweden. Peter Soderlund served almost three years of a four-year sentence for drug and weapons offences before he was released in 1998. He was helped by a newly formed organization run by former prisoners called Kris (Criminals' Return Into Society).
- 10 "The big difference between Kris and us is that we are happy to allow people who are still taking addiction medications to join us," he says. Both

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organizations work with the same goal: helping prisoners successfully reintegrate into society after they have been released. And what is life like for the prisoner in Sweden? "When I was inside, I was lucky. In Osteraker Prison, where I served my sentence, the governor was enlightened. We were treated well. But I knew that not all Swedish prisons were like that. I met so many people in there who needed help – after I received help from Kris, I knew I wanted to help others. With X-Cons, we meet them at the gate and support them into accommodation and offer a network of support."

- 11 "In Sweden, we believe very much in the concept of rehabilitation, without being naive of course,"

says Gustafsson. "There are some people who will not or cannot change. But, in my experience, the majority of prisoners want to change, and we must do what we can to help to facilitate that. It is not always possible to achieve this in one prison sentence.

- 12 "Also, it is not just prison that can rehabilitate – it is often a combined process, involving probation and greater society. We can give education and training, but, when they leave prison, these people need housing and jobs."

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the text.

- How many prisoners are currently incarcerated in Sweden?
- What has happened to the crime rate and to the number of prisoners in Sweden?
- How does the head of Sweden's prison and probation service explain this?
- How and why did the Swedish prison service have to change after 2004?
- In what ways does Sweden try to keep convicts with short sentences out of prison?
- What is the reoffending rate in Sweden and how does this compare to the UK?
- What three types of post-prison support are mentioned in the article?
- In addition to the above support, what do ex-cons need?

4 Related words

Complete the table. Then, write example sentences for those words you know but are not completely sure how to use.

verb	noun
	prisoner, prison
sentence	
escape	
	offender, offence
convict	
	rehabilitation
incarcerate	

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5 Discussion

- How would you describe Sweden's way of dealing with convicted criminals?

Would you say it is ...

... progressive?

... too soft?

... sustainable?

... humane?

- Do you agree with their ideology?
- In general, should convicted criminals be locked up or rehabilitated?

6 Webquest

- a. Try to find the answers to these questions. Don't forget to quote your sources.

Question	UK	USA	your country
What is the age of criminal responsibility?			
What is the current prison population?			
What is the harshest sentence possible?			
What is the reoffending rate?			
Is electronic tagging employed?			
Are there any government-funded or privately-funded rehabilitation schemes?			

- b. How easy was it to find the information? How do the three countries compare with each other and with Sweden?

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KEY

1 Warmer

Teacher's note: Write this question on the board *before* handing out the worksheets. Get the students to write their answer on a piece of paper. Collect the answers and redistribute them amongst the students. Students read out the answer they've been given and you all discuss the answers as a class.

2 Key words

1. progressive
2. probation
3. rehabilitation
4. relapse
5. sentence
6. commuted
7. convicted
8. reoffending
9. incarceration
10. lay
11. reintegrate
12. inside

4 Related words

verb	noun
imprison	prisoner, prison
sentence	sentence
escape	escape, escapee
offend	offence, offender
convict	convict, conviction
rehabilitate	rehabilitation
incarcerate	incarceration

3 Comprehension check

1. a little over 4,500
2. There has been no change in the crime rate but the number of prisoners has fallen by 6%.
3. He cannot explain this.
4. They had to put more emphasis on security as there were too many escapes.
5. by electronically tagging them and commuting their sentences to work in the community
6. 30-40% over three years; It's half the reoffending rate of the UK.
7. groups runs by ex-cons; the government-run probation service; lay people who befriend and supervise newly released ex-cons
8. training, education, jobs and housing